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Words, Words and More Words on Nicaragua

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WASHINGTON, March 19 — All over Capitol Hill, telephones were ringing with calls from constituents.

Philip C. Habib, President Reagan's special diplomatic envoy, was lobbying in the corridors, trying to capture a few swing votes.

And on the floor of the House, there was impassioned debate, as is usual when the House takes up a momentous issue, in this case one that Mr. Reagan has described as a historic test of his Presidency.

The issue is the Reagan proposal to provide \$100 million worth of aid to the rebels in Nicaragua. Today was the first day of debate; on Thursday comes the vote.

Representative Bill McCollum, a Florida Republican, warned his colleagues that a vote against the aid package was "a vote for Communism in Central America."

Opponents argued that a vote against the aid package was not a vote for Daniel Ortega Saavedra, the President of Nicaragua, or for other Sandinista leaders.

A Hawk Will Vote Against

Representative Tim Valentine, a conservative North Carolina Democrat, describes himself as "a genuine certified 100 percent hawk" who supported the American invasion of Grenada in 1983 and knows full well that the airwaves in his district now bristle with radio commercials urging him to support the aid plan.

But Mr. Valentine plans to vote against the President's request.

"It would just be pumping money down a sinkhole," he said in an interview. "I try to find ways to support my President. But I don't like giving away money to a bunch of illiterate farmers and cutthroats in Nicaragua when we can't find money to pay for rural electrification or to help the struggling textile industry in the United States."

Representative Henry J. Hyde, Republican of Illinois, is a proponent of the aid package. He expressed strong irritation with colleagues who criticized the anti-Communist rebels.

"Our friends on the left have never met an anti-Communist they liked," he said, turning to the Democrats. "As the refugees stream north, history is going to assign you folks the role of pallbearers at the funeral of freedom in Central America."

For all the passion spent in today's oratory, Mr. Hyde said, "I don't expect this debate to change a single vote."

Because the House has often voted on various proposals to provide or to

restrict aid to the rebels, perhaps 375 of the 435 members have firmly established positions on the issue.

The stakes in the vote to be taken Thursday were described in ever starker terms as the debate wore on, terms that eventually spanned not just borders but entire oceans.

In a letter to their colleagues, a group of seven conservative Republican House members, among them Jack F. Kemp of upstate New York, Newt Gingrich of Georgia, Vin Weber of Minnesota and Trent Lott of Mississippi, the minority whip, said that just as a Cuban armored regiment fought against Israel on the Syrian front in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, so "Nicaraguans will soon be helping their brothers in arms in Libya and Iran to achieve their stated goal of defeating Israel."

For this reason, they warned, the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua poses a potential threat not just to the United States but also to Israel. The presence of a Cuban armored regiment in Syria has not been generally noted in accounts of the 1973 war, but David G. Shedd, press secretary to Mr. Gingrich, said the information had been confirmed by intelligence

officials in the Administration.

Then there were more down-to-earth, simpler approaches to the issue.

Representative Stewart B. McKinney, a Connecticut Republican, said that he opposed aid to the rebels, but that his wife, Lucie, was telling him, "You better vote with the President or you will be in terrible trouble."

"She is a liberated woman," Mr. McKinney said. "She's got her own opinion on everything." On this issue, he said, she is hearing from friends in Westport, Fairfield and Stamford, Conn., who rarely offer political advice but feel strongly that the United States should assist the rebels, known as the contras.

"This is a very gutty, emotional issue," Mr. McKinney concluded.

As for Mr. Habib, the Presidential envoy, his pitch on Capitol Hill was said to have been that leaders of countries near Nicaragua had told him privately on his recent visit to the region that they supported Mr. Reagan's effort to put pressure on the Sandinista regime but could not openly declare their support.

How many votes that swung was anybody's guess. But as Representa-

tive Ed Zschau, a California Republican, saw things, Mr. Habib had been an effective advocate for the President's position.

Adding to the political passion in the debate today was the knowledge that the issue of aid to the contras might figure prominently in many Congressional elections this fall.

The National Conservative Political Action Committee is planning "independent expenditure campaigns" to publicize the voting records of 33 members who have opposed aid to the rebels.

The 33 include Representative Jim Leach of Iowa, a leading Republican critic of the President's policy in Nicaragua.

"Ncpac announced a massive fund-raising drive and has targeted me," Mr. Leach said. "It's a bit coercive, but my district is more concerned about problems in the central part of North America than in the central part of Latin America."

Remembering Vietnam

Like the Congressional election, analogies to Vietnam also pervaded the debate on Nicaragua. Representative Bob Dornan, a California Republican, saw economic decay in both Managua and Hanoi. Nicaragua, like Vietnam, keeps thousands of political prisoners, he said.

But the Speaker of the House, Thomas P. O'Neill Jr., Democrat of Massachusetts, saw another analogy.

"I voted for the Gulf of Tonkin resolution," he said, referring to the 1964 measure that opened the way to increased American military involvement in Vietnam. "In my view, I did the wrong thing. Tomorrow we face another Tonkin Gulf vote. I can see us getting into a war down there in Nicaragua."